

Recruiting university students to Nurture-U mental health trials using social media: Lessons learnt and the impact on participant diversity.

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Recruiting university students to Nurture-U mental health trials using social media: Lessons learnt and the impact on participant diversity.

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Abstract

Background: Using social media platforms to recruit participants for research has been demonstrated to be a far-reaching and successful recruitment method, especially for young people. One of the cited benefits of social media in recruitment is maximising the diversity of the sample. Nurture-U is a university student mental health project ran across six universities in the UK.

Objective: This paper provides a pragmatic depiction of co-designing and implementing a social media strategy to recruit university students to two mental health trials across all UK universities. In addition, a comparison of demographics of those recruited through social media compared to other recruitment methods was undertaken to identify if social media did increase the diversity of the sample.

Methods: Our student advisory group (SAG) assisted in social media strategy, advising on content, platform and when to engage. We trialled different adverts and employed a descriptive analysis of advert reach, link clicks, website traffic and research recruitment using Meta/TikTok business data, Google Analytics, and REDCap software. Chi-square analyses were undertaken of 1097 students to compare the sample recruited via social media to those recruited by other methods.

Results: We spent over £24000 on social media recruitment, which resulted in 35% of the overall recruitment numbers to the trials over a 12-month period. Through extensive trial and error, student advisor input, and market research, an Instagram advert led to success in participant recruitment. However, due to the transient nature of university life, this fluctuated over the academic year. There were significant differences in the samples recruited through social media and other methods on gender, sexual orientation, and age, but not on ethnicity or disability.

Conclusions: Social media led to a more diverse population for our mental health trials, demonstrating its effectiveness in increasing the reach of research recruitment. Our key lessons learnt in recruiting through social media surround awareness of the student calendar when planning research in universities, widening recruitment windows where appropriate. Additionally, significant resources, both financial and staff time, is needed for strategic implementation of social media recruitment strategies. Clinical Trial: ISRCTN86795807 ; ISRCTN56784470

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Original Manuscript

Recruiting university students to Nurture-U mental health trials using social media: Lessons learnt and the impact on participant diversity.

Abstract

Background: Using social media platforms to recruit participants for research has been demonstrated to be a far-reaching and successful recruitment method, especially for young people. One of the cited benefits of social media in recruitment is maximising the diversity of the sample. Nurture-U is a university student mental health project ran across six universities in the UK. This paper provides a pragmatic depiction of co-designing and implementing a social media strategy to recruit university students to two mental health trials across all UK universities. In addition, a comparison of demographics of those recruited through social media compared to other recruitment methods was undertaken to identify if social media did increase the diversity of the sample.

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Keywords: social media; trial recruitment; mental health; intervention; diversity

Introduction

The modern age presents equally modern issues for researchers in participant recruitment [1]. Social media has proven to be an effective recruitment method [2]. It is a method demonstrated to quickly reach target populations [3, 4], increasing access to hard-to-reach groups, especially regarding socially sensitive research topics [5]. Additionally, social media has been demonstrated as cost effective compared to other recruitment methods [6].

There are a variety of metrics that can be used to consider the ‘success’ of a post or advertisement on social media, such as view count (reach), user interaction (likes, shares and comments), and link clicks. When considering using social media for research, there is a differentiation to be made between general outreach as indexed by the view count or interaction, versus targeted outreach to a specific population and the link clicks to a research webpage, which recruitment requires [7]. In terms of general outreach, there is increasing literature outlining how young people access mental health information on social media. Personal, authentic videos have been reported to be most successful when considering view count [8, 9], with evidence of the efficacy of a so-called ‘influencer’ personality in promotion of mental health content [10]. These personal videos contain high perceived levels of trustworthiness and centrality in consideration with viewer immersion and empathy [11]. As such, most successful mental health videos are from personal accounts, not from healthcare professionals [12, 13].

However, research into what constitutes a successful social media advert for trials recruitment is in its infancy. Despite its many advantages and increasing evidence of its efficacy, there exist no guidelines in place for using social media to reach participants [14]. This has led researchers to continuously test ‘what works’, alongside navigating the ever-changing features and user bases of

different social media platforms to best reach participants. We have written this paper in response to calls for more analysis and publication of social media recruitment methods to clinical trials [15]. We hope to provide additional and updated knowledge to this area of interest and increasing relevance in the research sphere.

Methods

This paper presents a descriptive analysis of social media as a recruitment method to two mental health research trials aimed at university students. These trials are part of the Nurture-U research project [16] and test two separate interventions (see trial protocols for details):

- (1) 'Reducing Worry': an app to reduce worry and boost confidence, aimed at people with mild-moderate anxiety. Participants are randomised to test the app or continue receiving treatment as usual (ISRCTN86795807) [17].
- (2) 'Online CBT': a comparison of therapist-guided vs self-guided online cognitive-behavioural therapy, aimed at students with clinical levels of anxiety or depression. Participants are randomised to one of the two types of therapy (ISRCTN56784470).

There was one more trial in Nurture-U (ISRCTN18276230), but this recruited only from the University of Exeter and did not use social media for recruitment. Reducing Worry and Online CBT recruited nationally, and hence, for consistency, we report only on these trials for this paper.

All advertising for the trials led to the Nurture-U website trials page. If the potential participant clicked 'Take Part Now' they were directed to a screening page on REDCap, the software that hosted

the trials' data collection. Students went to the same recruitment screening page on REDCap for all trials. The screening questionnaire took approximately 5-10 minutes, at the end of which participants were directed to information sheets for the individual trials depending on whether they met the inclusion criteria for that trial as determined by their answers. Following this, the participant is invited to provide informed consent for trial participation, followed by baseline questionnaires which directs the randomisation of the participant to a specific trial arm.

The Nurture-U project began in December 2021, with an 18-month intervention-development stage before trials began in July 2023. Recruitment for Reducing Worry stopped in December 2024, and for Online CBT in May 2025. This paper includes analysis of the social media recruitment from when we started using paid adverts in November 2023 to the end of Reducing Worry recruitment in December 2024.

Developing a social media strategy with the Nurture-U student advisory group

The Nurture-U student advisory group (SAG) has been engaged in every stage of the project from its inception. More detail on the role of the student advisory group in the first year of the project has been published elsewhere [18].

The SAG developed Nurture-U's social media strategy. This involved initial meetings in Summer 2022, where Instagram was decided as the platform to focus on, and a plan to provide educational content alongside promotional material was made to encourage engagement. While accounts were created on X and Facebook, these accounts were not active beyond occasional promotional posts.

Instagram followers increased organically through promotion at Freshers Fairs in the participating

universities. Engagement increased more actively through the summer and autumn 2023 as student advisors led on creating and posting more student-generated content. At time of writing, the project has 1087 followers on Instagram. Since Autumn 2023, on advice from the SAG, Nurture-U also launched TikTok and LinkedIn accounts. Video content generated by students and the research team is posted on both Instagram and TikTok, and LinkedIn is focused on making connections with both students and academics in the field.

The strategy for trials recruitment was developed with the SAG as a rolling point of discussion across termly SAG meetings in 2023 and 2024. The ad co-designing process with student advisors utilised tools like Mural and Canva to gain student advisory feedback; student advisors could both vote on our initial concepts (that included critical wording specific to the research) as well as rework the designs and/or create their own. We also explored market research options, taking note of what other research trials were promoting. The research team then developed and tested different adverts.

Data collection and analysis

We kept a record of the content of each advert we trialled, price per day, and duration. We extracted data from the Meta and TikTok business platforms to identify how each advert performed, including reach and link clicks.

The REDCap screening questionnaire included the question 'Where did you find out about the Nurture-U project and this intervention study?'. Students could tick 'Instagram', 'Facebook', 'TikTok', 'Twitter' or 'other social media', as well as the other recruitment methods such as 'University email', 'Lecture shout out', or 'Poster'. We extracted the numbers who came into the screening database through the social media platforms we were advertising on each week to ascertain

the success of the adverts. We also recorded participant location based on their university to ascertain whether particular location-based advertising was effective.

All the data was inputted into an excel spreadsheet. A descriptive analysis of the performance of the advertising over time was conducted using line graphs.

Comparison of samples

The REDCap data for all participants who accessed the software in the period where we ran paid advertisements for the two trials was analysed using SPSS. Chi-square and independent sample t-tests were used to see if there were significant differences between the participants recruited through social media and other recruitment methods according to the age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and the university that the participants were attending.

Results

In total between 26/11/23 and 13/12/24 we spent £24,739 (including VAT) on social media adverts for recruitment to our research trials. Fifty seven percent of the 4117 participants who entered REDcap within this period indicated they had been directed through social media. Seven hundred and thirty eight of the 2111 participants who consented to screening for the trials were recruited specifically through social media, with 402 of these students continuing after the screening process to consent to one of the two national trials. This comprised 35.7% of the total number of students who consented to screening in this period, and 35.3% of the total number of students who consented to participation. As the other methods of trial recruitment were of minimal cost other than staff time (posters on campus, lecture shout-outs, utilising student mailing lists and newsletters), we estimate that our recruitment costs were approximately £50 per trial participant.

Ten different adverts were trialled over the 12-month period, a screenshot of the first page of each advert can be found in Figure 1.

Advertising platform:

The Meta advert did not contain specification of which Meta platform, but 95% (n=805) of students who consented to screening from social media reported seeing an advert on Instagram. It was not possible to tell from the Meta business suite where our advert was primarily placed, so it is not clear whether Instagram was more successful than Facebook or that Meta chose to place more adverts on Instagram.

The SAG advised us not to advertise on TikTok, citing minimal engagement with adverts on that platform. We trialled two reels (C and D in Fig 1) on TikTok across February. However, this resulted in two students consenting to screening and neither of these consented to take part in the studies. Hence, we did not continue.

We did not pay for advertising on X as undergraduate SAG members indicated that they did not use this platform. However, we did promote Nurture-U more generally across the year on X, and one participant indicated they had entered REDCap through a link on an X post.

Advertising content:

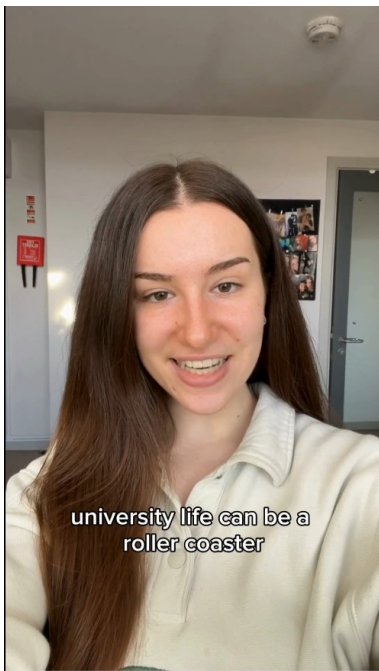
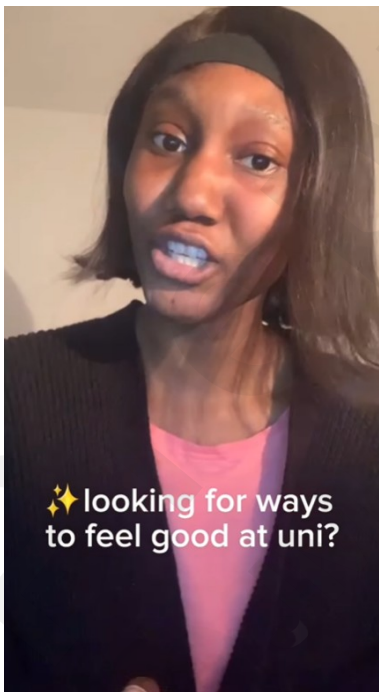
[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

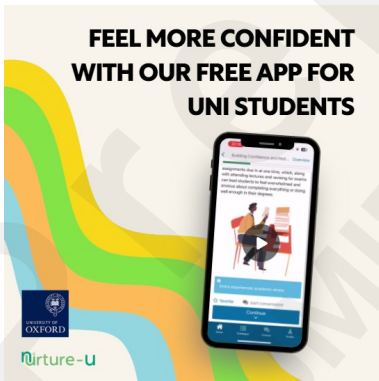
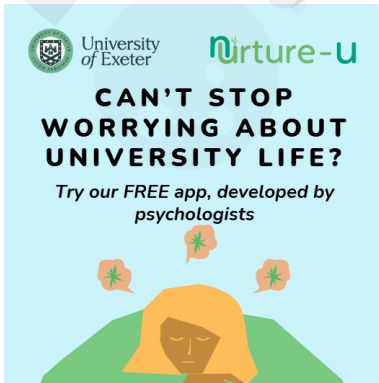
[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

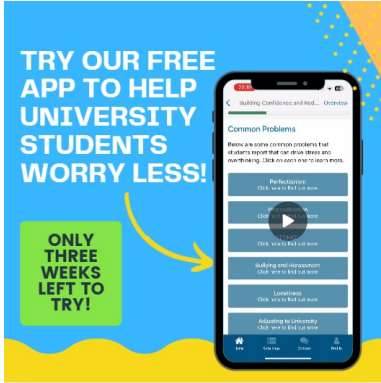
Table 1 shows the content, dates run, costs, and numbers recruited in those dates. Figure 1 allows for more in-depth comparison over time, displaying (1) average of link clicks per day, (2) costs of each advert per day, (3) average numbers who landed on the Trials page of our website per day, (4) the numbers who consented to screening of the trials and (5) numbers randomised over the course of the recruitment period. The numbers in black circles indicate what changes were made at each stage in recruitment in this timeline, corresponding to Figure 1.

Table 1: Advert content and recruitment success

	Description	First page design	Month(s) live	Cost per day	Numbers consented to screening	Numbers recruited to trial participation
A	Canva reel with music. Design from student co-created poster mirroring successful campaign in previous trial.		Nov-Dec 2023	\$6	0	0
B	Location specific student callout reel (trialed in Glasgow, Leeds, Bristol, Dundee, Nottingham and Sheffield)		Dec 23 Feb 24 (alongside D)	\$12.50 \$6	22 See D below	8 See D below

C	Co-created advert with student advisors - students talking to camera		Feb 24 Mar 24	\$6 \$10	0 6	0 2
D	Student talking to camera without script		Feb 24 (alongside B)	\$6	8	4
E	'Build your confidence' carousel post – different university logos according to location. Location details see Table 2.		Mar – Jun 24 Jul – Aug 24 (alongside F) Aug 24 (alongside G) Sep 24 Oct 24 (alongside H) Nov 24 (alongside I)	\$70 \$70 \$70 \$140 \$70 \$70	578 See F below See G below 70 See H below See I below	282 See F below See G below 31 See H below See I below

			Dec 24 (alongside J)	\$40-\$80	See J below	See J below
F	Summer carousel post	 Are you a uni student looking to THRIVE this summer? Try our FREE app for reducing worry, developed by psychologists from the University of Exeter University of Exeter nirture-u	Jul – Aug 24 (alongside E)	\$70	31	8
G	Worry carousel post	 Are you worried about making friends or feeling lonely at uni? Try our FREE app for reducing worry, developed by psychologists from the University of Exeter University of Exeter nirture-u	Aug 24 (alongside E)	\$70	2	1
H	Rainbow carousel post	 FEEL MORE CONFIDENT WITH OUR FREE APP FOR UNI STUDENTS University of Exeter nirture-u	Oct 24 (alongside E and Instagram Story ad with same design)	\$70	57	24
I	Overthinking carousel post	 University of Exeter nirture-u CAN'T STOP WORRYING ABOUT UNIVERSITY LIFE? Try our FREE app, developed by psychologists	Nov 24 (alongside E)	\$70	19	4

J	3 weeks left carousel post		Dec 24 (alongside E)	\$70	15	6
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An initial reel (Table 1, A) mirrored advertisements from a previous trial in 2019 [17]: a slideshow with text that played as a video with music. These initially were not successful, but location-specific designs (B) with higher budgets had more success. Advertisement was paused over the Christmas period and January to focus on local recruitment and plan a social media strategy with our student advisory group. This resulted in two reels using selfie-mode with students talking to camera, co-created with student advisors (C+D). These were not successful in boosting recruitment.

A new design (E) was developed based on the following SAG input:

- Simple designs are important: people will just keep scrolling if they have to work out what they are looking at.
- Credibility is key: we need to be clear we are from universities and not a potential sham company.
- Transparency: a clear example of the 'product' or software in use will encourage people to click.
- Colourful or aesthetically pleasing images to support the text will also stop people scrolling.

Carousel posts were implemented instead of reels, based on market research of other mental health apps and wellbeing advertising. We decided to focus the content of the adverts on the Reducing Worry app, hypothesising that this was harder to recruit for than for therapy. These core design decisions remained central to subsequent designs (1, F-J), with slight changes in content and colour according to time of year.

Recruitment success:

Advert E was initially extremely successful: an average of 63 students per week consenting to screening and 31 per week consent to trial participation over the first 4 weeks. However, the number of participants consenting started steadily decreasing as the summer approached, despite the cost of the adverts and Meta's reports of clicks remaining consistent. We surmised that this might be due to students having exams and then finishing their university studies for the summer. Despite SAG-

designed changes to content to reflect this (1, F and G), recruitment declined and we paused adverts in August. As the new academic year began recruitment rose, again with a decline towards the end of term, despite new content and increased spend (H-J).

Table 2 shows the total link clicks of each location over the whole recruitment period. London was the most successful area for link clicks. There were higher numbers in Oxford and the Midlands compared to the larger university cities in the North of England. The more sparsely populated south central and west areas were the least successful on link clicks.

Table 2: Total link clicks by location

Location	Number of link clicks
London, Cambridge, Colchester	9718
Oxford, Birmingham, Reading, Staffordshire	8578
Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield, York	6878
Scotland	5881
Wales	5728
Southampton, Bournemouth, Brighton	5387
Exeter, Bristol, Plymouth, Falmouth	5342

Diversity of sample

In comparing the sample of students who at least partially completed the REDCap screening forms through social media versus other recruitment methods, there were some significant differences. Of participants recruited through social media, 71% were from universities who were not the six Nurture-U partner universities, compared to 38.5% of those from other methods (χ^2 (1, 1856) = 186.869, $p < 0.001$). Those recruited through social media were significantly younger, with a mean

age of 21 (SD = 2.281) compared to 25 (SD=8.019) ($t(1851) = 12.758, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.274, 4.463]$). There was also a significant difference in the samples according to gender ($\chi^2 (2, 933) = 7.893, p = 0.0019$). In the sample recruited through social media, 82.6% were female, 9.4% were male, and 8% were non-binary, preferred to self-define, or not to say. The split in the sample recruited through other methods was 81.3%, 14% and 4.7% respectively. Additionally, there was a significant difference in the sexual orientation between groups, with 54.2% of those recruited through social media from the LGBTQ+ community, compared to 42.6% of those recruited through other methods ($\chi^2 (2, 940) = 12.921, p = 0.005$).

There was no significant difference in the samples recruited by the two different methods according to ethnicity, with white students accounting for 74.8% of the sample recruited through social media and 71.8% of the sample recruited from other methods ($p = 0.172$). There was also not a significant difference in the sample reporting a disability, with disabled students accounting for 26.6% of those recruited through social media and 22.3% of those recruited through other methods ($p = 0.131$).

Discussion

Reflecting on our use of social media for recruitment has enabled us to consolidate key learnings, which we will discuss now in relation to recent research and context.

Co-producing content design and placement:

The simple, bright colours, and large lettering of the successful adverts for the previous mental health trial EcoWeb [17] was not successful for Nurture-U. There was 4 years between recruitment periods for the two trials, and in this time there had been a marked shift in social media trends. The rise of

TikTok and the increase in online interactions over the Covid-19 pandemic has led to societal awareness of the differences in social media platforms and the roles each one plays in our online lives [19]. Our student advisors were clear that Instagram would be the most effective platform for our advertising, and they were right. The fact that a simple, carousel post was the most successful over more interactive videos and reels, may reflect what people want from Instagram, and hence what people want from an Instagram advert. What will be relevant to a study's target audience will depend on the moment in time of recruitment: while this format worked within the 2024 context, this will already have changed in 2025 and beyond.

A research study's Instagram profile has been shown to affect participation [20], showing how important the social media presence of a study or research group can be on people's attitudes towards participation. Our SAG led our successful Instagram output, through which we have organically gained over a thousand followers through 'day in the life' reels and student-focused wellbeing advice, and have built up a respectable level of TikTok engagement with similar content. However, similar approaches to our advertising content, i.e. students speaking to camera, were not successful. This demonstrates the importance of effective market research, looking at similar successful advertising campaigns of comparable studies or products, which enabled us to identify that simple images in carousel posts were more current.

Previous literature experimenting with different content for trial recruitment adverts has shown that using doctors to talk about clinical trials boosts recruitment as compared to using trial participants [13] and that information shared by a doctor may be more effective in disseminating formal and medical information and tackling logistical barriers to health [21]. We did not attempt using an expert clinical voice as a method and this may have been an omission. Our student advisors suggested applying to student influencers as prominent voices in the online space. We approached

several suggested accounts, but we were not successful, and those who did respond charged very high fees. We believe there are two reasons for this, one is that people's profiles are carefully curated so that they are very specific in what they promote [22]. Secondly, and related, there remains negative conversations around these which individuals may want to avoid. A recent study of reactions to influencers' posts about mental health found 25% of the comments were negative in content and 20% contained mental health stigma [23].

Time of year:

Student activities shift markedly month to month, from Freshers week, intense periods of assignments, exams, to longer holidays with changes of living arrangements and level of study, and this appeared to affect our recruitment strategy. Because recruitment dropped in busy periods of academic work and over the summer left only small windows for higher recruitment, specifically the beginning of academic terms. There is little research that has examined the influence of seasonality to recruitment. Langlois and Kriglstein [24] attributed not reaching participant targets in an online survey of Esport players partly to the recruitment period falling over the summer months, and there's acknowledgement of reduction in clinical trial recruitment in the summer due to staff holidays in hospital settings [25]. While the student calendar is particularly variable and marked by different stages of activity, the wider population will also be affected by time of year and corresponding variations in engagement in social media [26]. This is particularly challenging for research trials where recruitment windows are short, and further research is needed into the best methods to combat these fluctuations.

Resources:

Our cost per participant was similar to other studies promoting interventions [27], but significantly more than studies necessitating less engagement such as one-time surveys [6]. There were resource issues throughout the recruitment period that impacted our success, which have also been described by other research teams [27-29]. It was incredibly time intensive for a research team inexperienced in creating paid advertising campaigns to both design and implement our recruitment strategy. There are a wide variety of ways to advertise on Meta alone. There is a lack of clarity from the data available on the Meta business platform in how increased costs lead to increased engagement and where these measures of engagement come from. For example, Meta reports of 'link clicks' always going up in relation to spend but in many cases these do not correspond to Google Analytics data of website visits or REDCap figures of trial participation. Our lack of expertise also related to experimenting with different platforms, our attempt at advertising on TikTok partly failed due to needing a TikTok Business account to enable links in videos, and the challenges navigating this with limited time and financial resources. Additionally, social media adverts will be more successful if they are linked to active and engaged accounts that posts content regularly, which requires additional resources to maintain. There is no doubt that our costs were higher than they could have been if the team had known how to be more strategic in social media recruitment. Hence, studies that need to maximise the effectiveness of social media as a key recruitment strategy (for example due to short recruitment windows or lack of other options for recruitment) may wish to use the services of a specialist company.

Research study set-up

Social media strategy can only impact recruitment to a limited extent: once people have clicked the links, it is the study website and online data collection methods that are key for retention. Complexity and length of the screening process to clinical trials has previously been identified as a

key barrier to recruitment [30]. The Nurture-U trials were set up to target widely and then siphon people into the appropriate trial based on the level of symptoms in the screening questionnaire. However, it takes a minimum of 10 minutes from the start of the screening process to consenting and being randomised for a trial, which is a long process for people who have clicked through from a social media advert to undertake, considering people may be scrolling through Instagram while travelling, before a lecture, or in social situations. This is reflected in the reduction between the numbers in our REDCap database and those who consented to screening and then randomisation.

Additionally, there was a challenge of advertising two trials in one. One trial contained an opportunity for therapy and the other an app, and it was difficult to portray both options in a simple way in a social media advert. This led us to focus our content on the Reducing Worry app, our rationale being that it was under-recruiting. However, the unknown nature of the content of this app and its efficacy is likely to have affected the success of our advertising strategy [31]. Most trials of health-based apps recruit largely through clinical populations, targeting specific groups of people with specific symptoms or health goals often through hospital settings [32]. We were aiming to recruit in a general university population, and to prevent rather than treat symptoms. Trials of preventative interventions, recruiting people with risk of conditions but who do not have them yet, are far harder to recruit to than those testing different treatment options of an established condition [33].

Diversity of sample

There are many papers that cite the value of social media for widening the reach of adverts for research, but little research that directly compares the sample that was recruited through social media to those who were recruited to other methods. Social media can increase representativeness through

targeting campaigns to specific demographics, but by its nature will only reach those who use chosen platforms [28]. There are concerns that the more research recruitment takes place on social media, the more certain groups will be excluded, such as older participants or participants from specific ethnic groups [4].

Despite this, many studies report the benefits in recruiting hard-to-reach populations through social media [34]. This was also a key success of our strategy, in there being a higher proportion of students from universities that were not part of Nurture-U in the sample recruited from social media. These students were harder to reach through other methods due to limited abilities to share study details in universities where the team were not based. There were more link clicks in certain areas of the country, London and the South East specifically. While this partly can be explained by the denser populations in the Capital City, there were more clicks in the other cities in the South East (Oxford and Reading) than the cities with high student populations in the North of the country. While we cannot know why this is, it may be that Meta has different algorithms in who they display their adverts to, which may affect diversity and bias who is responding to studies.

Many studies reported comparatively more females and younger participants recruited through social media [35]. We also had younger participants, likely explained by the 18-25 age restriction on our adverts. Women are three times more likely to have a mental health diagnosis than men in the 16-24 age group [36], which may explain our high female sample. While women are more likely to spend more time on social media, which leads to proportionally more impact on mental health [37], the use of social media compared to other methods did not appear to impact the proportion of females in our project. Interestingly there was a larger contingent of males in the other recruitment methods, and a higher proportion of non-binary or self-defining students recruited from social media. This highlights the importance of using a mix of methods to enable a diverse sample.

While there was no significant impact of social media on the ethnic diversity or number of disabled students in our sample, there were more students from the LGBTQ+ community recruited through social media compared to other methods. Research has shown how the digital world can be a safe and supportive space for LGBTQ+ youth, allowing exploration of identity [38]. It may be both that LGBTQ+ students are more active on social media, but also that they interact with accounts that are similar to Nurture-U, with emphasis on wellbeing and community. It is worth noting however that social media can be a “double edged sword” for this community, with many experiencing discrimination and rejection [39], and these risks can extend to those researching in this space [40].

Further reflections and study limitations

There are aspects of recruiting through social media that we did not explore in this study. There are ethical issues in social media advertising, including the lack of control over how posts are shared, what people comment, and privacy and data protection for those who interact with the adverts [41]. For example, we chose to focus on the Reducing Worry trial in advertising, which may have impacted people’s understanding if they were directed to the Online CBT study. In future research it would be useful to include a measure to capture these issues, such as recording engagement or people’s understanding of the study messaging. Additionally, a more robust method of trialling content, for example an ABA design with direct comparison of different adverts, would provide stronger evidence of the efficacy of different approaches.

Conclusion

Social media is often highlighted as a method that will transform research recruitment, enabling

reach and representativeness which had not been possible previously. Our study demonstrates the positive effect of social media in increasing the diversity of our sample and accounting for a large proportion of our recruitment numbers. However, there are many challenges to successful implementation to a social media recruitment campaign, including content design, recruitment timelines, resources available, and the ever-evolving internet landscape. Co-production with those who the research project is targeting, in our case students, is key to a successful strategy. Studies that plan to use social media to recruit to research should include extensive forward planning on the details of this recruitment method and plan study schedules accordingly.

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Supplementary Files

Figures

1. First paid post: boosted canva-created reel (A in Table 1) 2. First Meta advert: Reel targeting specific cities (B) 3. Reels - students talking about trials, link changed from REDCap to website (Google Analytics data starts here) (C) 4. Reels targeting specific cities (B) 5. Student created ad – different students talking about trials (D) 6. Co-created post ad – “Build your confidence with a FREE app”. Kept ad rolling with one week break in May. (E) 7. New co-created ad “Are you a uni student looking to THRIVE this summer?” (alongside old ad) (F) 8. Re-introduction of “Build your confidence” ad (E) 9. New “Feel more confident” brightly coloured ad alongside “Build your confidence” ad. (H) 10. Targeting specific under-recruited locations (E).

